

THE
CIRCULAR LETTER,

FROM THE
MINISTERS and MESSENGERS

OF THE SEVERAL

Baptist Churches

OF THE

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ASSOCIATION,

Assembled at NOTTINGHAM, June 3, 4, 5, 1800.

maintaining the important doctrines of three equal persons in the God-
ternal and personal election; original sin; particular redemption; free
tion by the imputed righteousness of Christ; efficacious grace in rege-
; the final perseverance of real believers; the resurrection of the
ne future judgement; the eternal happiness of the righteous; and
ing misery of such as die impenitent; with the congregational order
churches, inviolably;

several Churches they represent, or from which they have received Letters:

at Loscoe, Derbyshire; Sutton-Ashfield, and Nottingham, Nottingham-
Sheepshead, Leicester, Sutton-in-the-Elms, Arnsby, and Foxton, Leices-
re; Oakham, Rutland; Spalding, Lincolnshire; Gretton, Clipstone,
rough, Braunston, Walgrave, Kettering, Moulton, Northampton, and
Northamptonshire; Olney, Buckinghamshire; Thorne, Bedfordshire;
Albans, Hertfordshire.

be to you, and Peace, from God the Father, and from
Jesus Christ our Lord.

LOVED BRETHREN,

THROUGH divine goodness we met together at the
d place appointed, and with a good degree of sacred
e. The accounts from the Churches, as usual, were
xed kind. Some are in a low and discouraged state.
dissolved.* There are several others, however, which
ly, encreasing, and spiritual. Two of the churches
were long destitute, have, within the course of the
een happily provided with pastors.† Many of our

the church at Burton-upon-Trent.

the church at Northampton, over which Mr. KELLY was ordained,
1799; and the church at Thorne, over which Mr. CLAYPOLE
ned, Apr. 20. 1800.

Clipstone: Printed at the Office of J. W. Morris.

hearts have been not a little revived by the intelligence of a great and gracious work of God amongst our brethren on the other side of the atlantic.* May He, with whom is the residue of the Spirit, extend these showers of blessings to our churches! Indeed, by the letters from the churches, we are not without hope that some drops have already begun to fall upon us, and which we are willing to hope may be an earnest of still greater blessings in reserve. To this end, we earnestly recommend a spirit of *extraordinary prayer*, both to the churches and to individuals; and this not only at our monthly prayer-meetings, but on other occasions. The Lord has promised to take away the heart of stone, and to give a heart of flesh; but for this he hath said, He will be enquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them.

We can truly say, brethren, that the welfare of the several churches, with which we stand connected, lies near our hearts. While we wish to have no dominion over your faith, we are ambitious to be helpers of your joy. It is our endeavour, in our annual letters to discuss such subjects, as may tend to your edification. Our present enquiry respects **THE QUALIFICATIONS NECESSARY TO AN ADMISSION INTO A CHRISTIAN CHURCH:** An enquiry of no small importance. To receive additions; to introduce new members into your societies is a pleasing business: Yet it is a business that requires eminent measures of caution and tenderness: Caution, lest you be crowded with characters, who, instead of being a blessing among you, will be the bane of your societies; yet tenderness, lest contrary to our Lord's example you break the bruised reed, or discourage the weaker part of his sincere disciples. You will tremble at the idea of despising the day of small things. Such characters have a peculiar claim upon your attention. You will, therefore, make it your study to imitate the example of Jesus; who, though he inveighs against intruders into the sheep-fold, yet gathers the lambs with his arm, and carries them in his bosom.

He must be in a great degree a stranger in our Israel, who is not aware, that many, once large and flourishing churches, have fallen into decay. Multitudes have become extinct, and not a trace of their former existence can be found; while numbers, which are not totally annihilated,

* See *A Brief Account of the late Revivals*, Reprinted by brother Morris price 2d. which we wish every family in our congregations to possess,

have scarce any thing remaining, but the wreck of their former glory. To investigate the causes of their decline, would be a very extensive, but upon a proper occasion, a very important undertaking. At present we shall only observe that, in our view, a want of due attention to the character of such as they admitted into their communion, was one step by which their ruin was accelerated. Thus men of erroneous principles, or worldly hearts, filled the churches of Jesus Christ. The holy Spirit was grieved, and withdrew his divine influences from sacred ordinances. The bond of christian love ceased. The interests of truth and holiness were disregarded. The few that remained, whose hearts were towards the Lord God of Israel, hung their harps upon the willows, and mourned in secret. Their societies gradually mouldered into ruin. And now, Ichabod may be written upon them, for their glory is departed.

The question before us, brethren, may be considered in a twofold view: Either what properly qualifies a person *in himself* for a connexion with a christian church; or, what are those qualifications which will *justify a christian church in receiving him*. That these are distinct, you will easily perceive: The latter is that which more directly claims our attention; but a brief description of the former is not foreign to our purpose, as it will prepare the way for treating the latter with advantage.

To attend to the *former*. We begin by remarking the *nature* and *end* of church fellowship. A christian church, is a society formed for religious purposes. These are principally two: The promotion of the cause of Christ at large; and the spiritual edification of individuals. The former consists in the spread of truth and holiness. And while these are promoted, glory results to God, and happiness increases among men. Hence, it is easy to observe, that these interests will never be sincerely sought or served, by those who are disaffected to truth and holiness; or, who are destitute of love to God and man. Again, another end is the spiritual edification of individuals. This may be considered as consisting in progress in knowledge and faith; in conformity to, and communion with Christ. How improper then are the ignorant and unbelieving, the ungodly and the worldly, for such a connection! Looking, brethren, into the New Testament, you find, that those who composed the churches of

Christ in the times of the apostles, are delineated under various characters, none of which convey an idea of the primitive churches being open to such persons as would now in many communities pass for visible christians.

Those who were added to the churches in those times *were pricked to the heart, gladly received the word, and were baptized.* Acts ii. 37, 41. *Believers* were added to the Lord, even multitudes, both of men and women. Acts v. 14. The grand principles which they believed were,—that Jesus was the Son of God,—that he died for their sins according to the scriptures, and that there was no salvation in any other. These were termed, The doctrine of the Cross; and on these the preachers dwelt: So they preached, and so christians believed. Nor did their belief consist in a mere speculative opinion, such as now generally prevails in christian countries, that Jesus was the Messiah. It was believing *with the heart*, and believing *unto righteousness*. Again, we find them described as the subjects of *sanctification*; as *saints and faithful*; as *holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling*; as those who *gave themselves first to the Lord, and then to one another by the will of God.* 1 Cor. i. 2. Col. i. 2. Heb. iii. 1. 2 Cor. viii. 5.

A christian society in a collective view, is stiled a *spiritual house*; a *holy priesthood*; a *holy temple*; a *habitation for God, through the Spirit.* 1 Pet. ii. 4. Eph. i. 21, 22. Here, brethren, you are abundantly furnished with hints of instruction to guide your enquiries, respecting the qualifications of such as are proper to be admitted members of your societies.

You may not be able to keep out all characters of different descriptions, as you cannot know the heart but by profession and practice: yet none else have any *right* there. The visible church of Christ is confined to those who are, or appear to be, sincere christians.

Such characters answer the *end* of Church Communion. Their hearts being formed after the heart of Christ, they are one with him in the great design of his mediation, and will of course yield him hearty service in promoting his cause: but where these things are wanting, however men may be made to subserve Christ's interest, they are not his willing servants, and generally prove very injurious to christian churches.

The various *duties* incumbent on the members of a church of Christ cannot be properly discharged by characters

of any other description than the above. The royal law in all the churches of the Redeemer is, Love one another with pure hearts fervently. This comprehends the whole. All the various duties you should discharge, are but so many exercises of love in different forms. Where this divine principle reigns, it will naturally dictate that conduct which is becoming, and render the practice of it easy. You are solemnly charged to pray for one another, to live in peace, to bear one another's burthens, to exhort one another, to edify one another, to be kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. To be ready to communicate of the good things of this world, in times of necessity, according to your ability, and that not grudgingly, or of necessity, for God loveth a cheerful giver. In a word, not to look each upon his own things, but every man upon the things of others; and thus to rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Hence it is easy to perceive that such, and only such characters, are proper subjects for union and fellowship in the Gospel, whose hearts are under the influence of divine love: such as are men of prayer, of a peaceable spirit, and who will follow after the things that make for peace: men of liberality, disposed to abound in acts of charity: in a word, men of a disinterested and public spirit: men, who, being in truth members of the body of Christ, will have the same care one for another; and whether one member suffer, shall suffer with it; or one member be honoured, shall rejoice with it.

But men who are strangers to personal religion are not only incapable of the proper discharge of the duties of a christian church, but are equally incapable of enjoying its *privileges*. There are privileges connected with christian fellowship calculated to promote your spiritual interests, and, upon this account, are highly prized. No honours or emoluments of a worldly nature are attached to a name and a place in the house of God: but honours and advantages, of far superior lustre in your esteem, have induced you to resolve, that you will dwell in the house of the Lord, all the days of your life. Here you behold his beauty, and learn his will. Walking in the fellowship of the Gospel, you feel you have a particular interest in the concerns of the church of Christ. You unite with your christian brethren in the services of the sanctuary, and take your seat with them at the table of the Lord, as members of the family of Christ. You have a peculiar share in their affections, prayers, and christian counsel. Their eyes are upon you for good, for

your spiritual good. Do you enjoy a season of prosperity, or pass through an hour of adversity, you find your companions in the kingdom and patience of Christ, ready to share your pleasures, or to participate your pains. And when they are in similar circumstances, you reckon it not the least of your privileges, to return similar acts of love and friendship. Walking in communion with the saints as your brethren, your love to them, and your likeness to Jesus your elder brother, increase. Thus growing in grace, and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, you are gradually meetened for that period, when you shall join the general assembly, and church of the first-born on high. But who except those who are born from above, who have tasted that the Lord is gracious, who are translated from under the power of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son, who have a relish formed within, which is spiritual and divine, will discern a beauty, or taste a sweetness in privileges of such a nature?

Let us sum up the whole in a few words. Those who are proper characters to be received into communion with a christian church, should be spiritual men; men whose minds harmonize with the design of Christ in the constitution of a christian church; men disposed to seek the good of the interest of Christ in general, and of that society to which they unite in particular; men devoted to God; men who hold fast the form of sound words; and who in their spirit and walk, adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour.

We come now, *Secondly*, to consider the question in another view, namely, *What are those qualifications in a Candidate for communion with a christian church, which will justify that church in receiving him?* And here we may observe that though, according to the above statement, *real godliness* be absolutely necessary to entitle any person to claim admission; yet the want of it may not in all cases warrant a church in refusing it. If indeed the want of real religion were *evident*, it would be otherwise; but as we have no means of judging of the sincerity of men's hearts, but by their words and actions, it is on these grounds that we must proceed. The terms of christian communion are not what a person is in the sight of God, but that which he is visibly or apparently to men: It is a *credible profession of christianity*; or such a profession as, in regard to the things professed, and the manner of professing them, appears in a judgment of charity to be truly christian. We will now only attempt a few particulars which we apprehend such a profession to include.

First, The thing professed must be *christianity*, christianity pure and personal. Of the purity of the things professed it is undoubtedly your province to judge; not as measuring it by your own ideas and experiences, for that were *measuring yourselves by yourselves, and comparing yourselves among yourselves*,—but by the oracles of God. The sum of that which the apostles testified was, *Repentance towards God, and Faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ*. This therefore may be considered as the sum of christianity, and the grand object of a christian profession.

Whatever allowance ought to be made for different modes of expression, and however far a candidate ought to be indulged in expressing his faith in his own words,—If what he avows appear to you to deviate in any important points from *the faith of Jesus*, you ought not to accept him. The church of Pergamos was reproved for having those amongst them who held antichristian doctrine. Some churches have judged it expedient to express their leading principles in writing, and to require the concurrence of the candidate in those articles of christian faith,—We have no particular objection to such forms, provided they be drawn up with brevity and scriptural simplicity, and be open to future correction as the sentiments of the church with regard to what is the true scripture doctrine may require; but if drawn up on other principles, they are in danger of becoming a snare to tender consciences, and a bar to serious enquiry. The thing for which we contend is this, That every christian church has a right, and a right which they are bound to exercise, to judge whether the profession made by a candidate for communion include the truth as it is in Jesus.

The object professed must not only be pure but *personal* christianity.—Some have supposed that to be a member of the visible church of Christ, and so entitled to a participation of its privileges, nothing more is necessary than a general profession of the christian religion, in opposition to heathenism, judaism, or deism, accompanied with a decent outward deportment; and that persons making such a profession may come to christian ordinances with a good conscience, though at the same time they make no pretence to real piety, and are even conscious that they are strangers to it. For a complete refutation of this notion we refer you to President Edwards on “The Qualifications for full Communion in the Visible Church.” That great writer has ably proved that

nothing deserves the name of a christian profession where the thing professed is not genuine personal christianity.

Many who are averse to congregational church-government have objected to the practice of our churches, in requiring from a candidate for communion an account of his religious experience. We do not wish to contend about words. Let them call it if they please, *a profession of christianity*. If we allow every person to make that profession in his own words, and to tell his own tale respecting means, occasions, and other circumstances, it is that the true sentiments of his heart may be expressed. And we are free to acknowledge that it is not on the manner in which he has been brought to believe in Christ for the salvation of his soul that we ought to lay any stress, but on a declaration of *the thing itself*. If the relation which a candidate gives of his religious exercises include a credible profession of repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, be it ever so brief, we ought to be satisfied: but if this be wanting, be it ever so circumstantial, we ought not.

Some churches on the congregational plan seem to dispense with an account being given of the change of the heart, and to content themselves with requiring an acknowledgment of a belief of the *general doctrines* of christianity: but a profession of repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, includes not merely what are our ideas of general doctrines, but a declaration that *we do repent of our sins, and believe in Jesus alone for the salvation of our souls*. We hope our churches will never dispense with a profession, in whatever mode that profession is made, of *personal experimental* religion as a term of communion. Should this ever be the case, you may retain the forms of godliness, but will soon be destitute of the power of it. The *confessions* made by the primitive converts did not so much relate to what Adam had done, or to any other general doctrine, as to what *they* themselves had done, *their* sorrow on account of it, and *their* faith in Jesus for deliverance from it.

Secondly, It is necessary to the credibility of a profession, that there be a *declared willingness to yield obedience to all the commandments of Jesus Christ*. He with whom we have to do is a Prince as well as a Saviour; and that profession cannot claim to be treated as sincere which does not bow with unlimited subjection to his authority. Christ hath all power in heaven and earth, and has declared the terms of

his discipleship to be, That we deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow him. He hath also required those who repent of their sins to be baptized in his name, and to observe all things whatsoever he hath commanded them. We ought no doubt to beware of making laws where Christ hath not made them; but if any man hesitate to comply with what the Lord hath manifestly required, whatever may be thought of his piety in other respects, we cannot consistently treat him as a member of the visible church of Christ, as herein in a great degree consists the visibility of christianity.

Thirdly, It is necessary to the credibility of a profession, that *the spirit or manner* in which it is made comport with what is professed, and as far as time and opportunity have been afforded, that the *conduct* of the party be also consistent with it.—Penitence and impenitence has each its language, and manner of expression. With all due allowance for the different tempers and constitutions of men, no one can reasonably deny that a profession of repentance might be made with such a levity of spirit as would manifestly give it the lie. The proud spirit of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who valued themselves in being Abraham's seed, and who, when they came to the baptism of John, seemed to have given themselves airs of consequence on this account, appears to have been the main thing that rendered their profession of religion suspicious. *O generation of vipers, said the baptist, who hath warned YOU to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth FRUIT MEET FOR REPENTANCE and think not to say within yourselves we have Abraham for our father.* If Simon Magus had discovered the same spirit previous to his being baptized, which he did shortly after it, we apprehend Peter would not have admitted him to that ordinance, nor to communion with the church.

Many of those who propose themselves for membership with our churches are *of some standing in religious profession*; and in these cases an enquiry ought no doubt to be made, whether their conversation has been, and continues to be consistent with it. And even those whose repentance may be very recent, if it be genuine, some fruits of it will be apparent. We might have supposed that the dying thief, though he might repent and believe the gospel, yet would have been incapable of proving it in so short a time, and under such unfavourable circumstances: but perhaps a more credible profession was never made, nor fruits meet for repentance brought forth in greater fulness. His hands and

his feet were nailed to the cross, he could do nothing therefore with them. He could not *deny himself*, for self gratification was beyond his reach: neither could he *take up the cross* for Christ, for he was already subjected to it for his own crimes: nor could he follow the Lord Jesus in his ordinances, or through a series of persecutions and afflictions. In short, he had nothing left unbound but his heart and his tongue; with one of which he believed unto righteousness, and with the other made confession unto salvation. He rebuked his fellow thief, condemned himself, justified the Saviour, owned him as the Lord Messiah, and implored to be remembered by him when he should come into his kingdom.

Finally, Whatever characters the Scripture teaches a christian church to *exclude*, it teaches them by implication not to accept; and whatever furnishes ground for *admonition* in a member of a church, must furnish at least equal ground for suspension in a candidate. We need not point out what those things are, as our letter of last year was devoted to that enquiry.

We hope, dear brethren, these few directions will be found to accord with the Holy Scriptures; and that you will be concerned more and more to conform to their dictates. Such a conduct will be followed with a train of happy consequences. Acting in this manner, you will demonstrate your concern for the credit and honor of the cause of Christ, and in some happy degree, the purity and comfort of your respective societies. And, should you after all, find by painful experience, that in some instances you have been deceived, and be reduced to the distressing necessity of excluding some, whom you once embraced with pleasure, you will, even at last, have this for your rejoicing, the testimony of your consciences, that in all you did, you made the divine word your rule, and the divine honor your end.

And now, dear brethren, we must close this annual address. While we are desirous to be helpers of your joy, we intreat, that you would so walk and act, that you may be our joy and crown. Study the peace of those societies, to which you respectively belong. Exercise self-denial, that by love, ye may serve one another. Look not every man on his own things, but every man on the things of others. Perhaps the apostle never felt more pungent grief than when he uttered that lamentation, All seek their own, not the

things which are Jesus Christ's. Fill up your places with steadiness in the house of God. Be diligent in attending church meetings, and regular in taking your seat at the table of the Lord. The omissions of some in these matters, ill agrees with their solemn vows, and sacred engagements to one another, and to Christ. Beware of having your attention inordinately taken up with the events of time, live a life of faith upon the wisdom and the power, the truth and the goodness of your God. Remember that the reins of universal government are in the hands of Jesus. His throne is firm: His plan is in full view. His crown is secure on his head. Whatever changes may affect earthly empires, you belong to a kingdom that cannot be moved. Mind your generation work. Seek the spread of truth and holiness. This is the work to which you are called. No others interests, comparatively, are worth a thought. Recollect you are strangers and pilgrims here below. Heaven is your eternal home. Gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end, for the grace that is to be brought unto you, at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Live to God, and be happy. In a word, beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as you know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

Signed by

Richard Hopper, Moderator.

~~~~~  
BREVIA TES.

TUESDAY Evening VI. After singing, Mr. *Hopper* engaged in prayer, and was chosen Moderator. Letters from the Churches were read; minutes taken of their contents; and after singing, Mr. *Churchill* concluded in prayer.

WEDNESDAY Morning VI. Met for prayer: brethren *Burton*, *Newell* of Derby, *Jarman*, *Fletcher*, *Claypool*, *Keely*, and *Simmons*, were engaged in this service.

———— Halfpast X. Assembled for public worship. Mr. *Cave* prayed; Mr. *Blundel* preached from Heb. i. 14. *Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?*—And after singing, he concluded in prayer.

———— Halfpast II. The congregation being rather crowded in the morning, at the kind offer of Rev. Mr. *Alliott*, the worship was carried on in his Meeting-house in the afternoon.

Mr. Mills prayed: Mr. Sutcliff preached from 1 Cor. xv. 58. *Therefore, my beloved brethrien, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord: for as much as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.*—The service was closed with prayer by Mr. Sutcliff.

WEDNESDAY Evening VI. Mr. Crapps began in prayer. Mr. Fuller preached, and after singing, concluded in prayer. His text was Ephes. v. 25, 26, 27.———*Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it: That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*—After public worship, the Circular Letter, drawn up by brother Sutcliff, was read, and ordered to be printed.

THURSDAY Morning VII. Mr. Nichols prayed; the ministers related their experience; and Mr. Evans concluded the public services with prayer.

The Ministers and Messengers being convened, the concerns of the Association were then adjusted, and after prayer by the Moderator, the meeting was dissolved.

The next Association to be held at OAKHAM, on the Tuesday and Wednesday AFTER Whitsun-week. Mr. Evans and Mr. Fuller to preach. Mr. Morris to draw up the next Circular Letter, containing *A persuasive to christian fellowship.*

\* \* Put up at the CROWN.

### STATE OF THE CHURCHES.

| Added.                      |    |   | Diminished.        |    |
|-----------------------------|----|---|--------------------|----|
| On a profession of faith... | 76 | ↓ | By Dismission..... | 7  |
| By Letter.....              | 5  | ↕ | — Exclusion.....   | 37 |
| Restored.....               | 2  | ↑ | — Death.....       | 40 |
|                             | 83 |   |                    | 64 |

Clear Increase 19.

### Lately Published.

1. PERIODICAL ACCOUNTS NO. VI. of the Baptist Missionary Society. Price 1s. Button.
2. DISCOURSES on the All-sufficient gracious assistance of the Spirit of Christ. By Dr. Rippon. Price 2s. Button.

Clipstone, Northamptonshire. From the Press of J. W. Morris.

